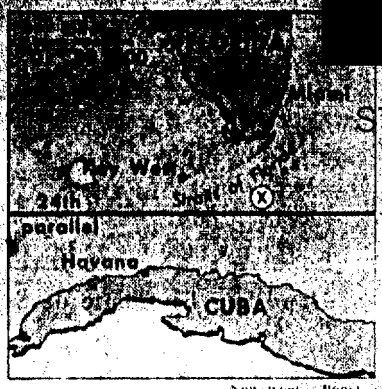
'Not Dangerous—Only a Little Rattle Showing'



The Attack: North of the 24th

Brinkmanship

The Shots Heard Round the World

Four blips flickered onto the radarscope at the U.S. air-defense station at Key West, Fla., glowing a luminous green in the darkened room. The radar man followed the electronic spoor northeast across the 24th parallel—the "trigger line" between Florida and Cuba beyond which no suspect plane can fly unchecked. Then the word went out: "Bogies 78 miles, course 060, angels ten"—unidentified planes 78 miles offshore, on a 60-degree course, at 10,000 feet. Two Marine F4B Phantom jets, already in the air, veered off for a look. Four more Phantoms scrambled aloft from Boca Chica airfield on Key West.

The blips were a portent of trouble. But for Paris Jackson and Benjamin Washington, the first of the planes they spotted seemed an omen of hope, circling 2 miles high in the gathering dusk on the Straits of Florida. Their flagless, wooden-hulled shrimp boat, the Ala, was adrift and leaking. A week out of Fort Myers, Fla., on a shrimping run to the Dry Tortugas, her diesel engine had burned out, and with it her radio and her pumps. Now, four days later, she was bobbing helplessly 70 miles north of Cuba, shipping water as fast as Jackson and Washington could bail it out.

So, when they spotted that first jet and three more that joined it, the Ala's two Negro crewmen snatched up makeshift flags—a pair of coveralls and a green rag—and waved for help. Sure enough, the planes banked right, and one zoomed low over the 67-foot shrimper—so low the men could see the pilot's face and the emblem that marked the plane as one of Fidel Castro's made-in-U.S.S.R. MIG's.

"Then," said Washington later, "he started shooting."

Hit the Deck: "Rockets," said the first Marine pilots, who roared in just as the fireworks started. But it sounded to Washington and Jackson like machine-gun fire. "I could see the bullets spraying in the water on the port side," Washington said, "maybe a couple hundred yards away. Paris hit the deck. God, I was scared." Close behind, a second MIG roared low across the shallow, turquoise water, spitting more shots across the Ala's path.

And then, as suddenly as it began, the Ala incident was over. No match for the faster Phantoms, the Cuban jets—obsolescent Korean War era models—ran for home. The Marines, with no orders to shoot or to chase, watched them go, then turned back to Boca Chica. Within hours, Jackson and Washington were homeward bound aboard the destroyer escort Kretchmer, shaken but unhurt.

If the shots had missed the Ala, they were still heard round the politically sensitive world. Ever since the October missile crisis, President Kennedy had been pursuing what looked to his critics like a walk-soft policy toward Cuba, with no big stick in sight. It did no good to argue that the galling presence of 17,000 or more Soviet troops on the island was a matter best dealt with quietly by the two superpowers. Even the news last week that Khrushchev meant to bring "several thousand" of them home by March 15 could not still the cries for direct, militant action (following story). Cuba had become a political fire on Capitol Hill—a smoldering fire that simply would not go out.

Offensive Unit: In that setting, the Ala incident only raked up the coals. To GOP Sen. Kenneth Keating of New York, long the thorniest critic of Mr. Kennedy's stance on Cuba, the attack "sweeps away with rocket fire" the Administration argument that no Soviet "offensive" weapons remained in Cuba. Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia thought the United States should invoke the legal doctrine of "hot pursuit"—chasing attack planes back to their bases if necessary to destroy them. Rep. Donald C. Bruce, an Indiana Republican, gibed: "We should have used our defensive weapons in defense against their defensive weapons."

Mr. Kennedy, indeed, issued orders to the armed forces to "take all necessary measures"—presumably including shooting to kill—against any such attacker. A stern protest went to Cuba, with a demand for an explanation. Radio Havana had one ready: the incident had been [illegible] provoked.

The U.S. had eyewitnesses aplenty. But they could not answer all the questions that would place the incident in perspective. Were the pilots shooting to kill, or harassing the Ala, or simply taking target practice? "I don't think we